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AUTHOR	Schuster, Jennifer; Graham, Steven; Moloney, Mairead
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ABSTRACT

This brief discusses findings from the first year of a 3-year study of expectations, planning, and outcomes for high school students (N=181) in Massachusetts school districts who are receiving special education services and their families. Students and parents will complete a survey once a year for 3 years. Students are from various racial/ethnic backgrounds, from grades 9-12, and in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Analysis of the first year's survey results indicate the following: (1) most students thought they were likely to find a job immediately after high school; (2) although both parents and students thought that work was important, they valued employment for different reasons; (3) students had higher expectations for work and rated their own level of self-determination higher than their parents did; and (4) parents perceived themselves to be more involved in students' life planning than students perceived them to be. Implications of these findings suggest the need to strengthen parent and student expectations early and connect students and parents as planning partners. (DB)

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BUILDING A FUTURE: WORKING WITH THE POST-HIGH SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS & PARENTS

By

JENNIFER SCHUSTER,
STEVEN GRAHAM, &
MAIREAD MOLONEY

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Building a Future: Working with the Post-High School Expectations of Students & Parents

by Jennifer Schuster, Steven Graham, & Mairead Moloney

Introduction

The transition from school to adult life can be a difficult process for high school students and their families. During this period of change, students must begin to set goals for their futures and plan with their families on how to reach these goals. This period of change may be even more difficult for students with disabilities who may have additional barriers to face when making plans for the future. To better understand this transition process, the Institute for Community Inclusion is conducting a study of high school students in Massachusetts who are receiving special education services and their families. The goals of this project include examining student and parent expectations, understanding what factors play an important role in the planning process, and discovering what circumstances may predict high expectations for students and parents. The study will also examine the impact of Social Security on the transition process for students who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI). This brief reports the findings from the first year of the project and offers suggestions for parents and educators who are involved in transition planning with high school students.

Methodology

Students and parents will complete a survey once a year for three years. On the survey, participants rate a series of statements on a scale of 0 ('not true') to 3 ('completely true'). The survey questions address short-term and long-term expectations for life after high school, expectations for employment, the importance of work, student level of self-determination, and level of parent involvement in the planning process. Student responses are compared with the responses of the parents in order to note similarities and differences in the student and parent views.

Participants

The study participants are students receiving special education services and their family members from the Brockton, Chicopee, Malden, and Worcester school systems. To date, 181 students and 159 parents have completed surveys. See Table 1 for a description of the student participants.

Table 1: Student Demographics

		% of students
Gender	Male	46
	Female	54
Ethnic/racial Background	Caucasian	57
	Latino/Hispanic	16
	African-American	10
	Native American	8
	Haitian	1
	Other	7
Age	18 or under	80
	19 or older	20
	16-modal age	30
Grade level	Freshman	35
	Sophomore	31
	Junior	15
	Senior	19
Community	Urban	46
	Suburban	39
	Rural	15

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CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL • 300 LONGWOOD AVENUE • BOSTON, MA 02115
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The type of disability identified for each student was quite varied, and in some cases more than one disability was reported for a particular student. See Table 2 for the distribution of disability types.

Table 2: Student Disability Type

Disability	% of students
Physical	11
Cognitive	20
Learning	58
Emotional / Psychiatric	6
Behavioral	13
Sensory	9
Other (Autism, etc.)	3

Of the sample, 102 of the students and their families reported receiving no public benefits, 34 reported receiving SSI, 7 received SSDI, and 6 of the students received Social Security Survivor Benefits. When asked if they were currently looking for work, 34% of the students responded that they were, and most were hoping to find a paid job in the community. Twenty-eight percent of the students surveyed already held part-time jobs. Thirty-nine percent of the students were receiving career services in the school, although the majority of the students (61%) were not.

Findings

Most students thought they were likely to find a job immediately after high school.

Students were asked to judge how successful they thought that their lives would be shortly after high school in terms of reaching their short-term goals and finding employment. Seventy-six percent of students thought that it was at least mostly true that they would have a job shortly after finishing high school. While this finding is encouraging, it is perhaps more important to note that almost one quarter of students expected to be unemployed after high school.

Although both parents and students thought that work was important, they valued employment for different reasons.

Students and parents were given a list of characteristics that might be important about work, and asked to rate how significant those reasons were to them. Although parents and students rated all of these items as very important, they had different views about which reasons were most important. Parents thought that work was important because it makes their child feel productive, successful, independent, and responsible. Students thought that making money, meeting new people, and feeling responsible were the most important benefits of work.

Students had higher expectations for work and rated their own level of self-determination higher than their parents did.

Students and parents rated their expectations for the student's work life after finishing school. These ratings applied not only to finding a job, but also to being able to obtain the necessary supports in the workplace and being satisfied with their occupation. Students' expectations were higher than the parents' for both the short-term and long-term with a statistically significant difference.

Self-determination involves having defined goals and knowing the best means of achieving those goals. Parents and students rated the extent to which students made their own decisions about life after school, and their ability to make these decisions. Students rated themselves higher in this regard (2.46 out of 3) than their parents rated them (1.86 out of 3). This finding indicates that students have higher levels of self-determination and feel more competent about planning and decision-making than parents recognize.

Parents perceived themselves as more involved in students' life planning than students perceived them to be.

Both parents and students rated the involvement of the parents in planning for the long-term goals of the students. Parents rated their own level of involvement in planning for the students' future higher than the students rated their parents' involvement (average rating of 2.56 compared to 2.33).

Implications

The findings of this study highlight some of the issues regarding short-term and long-term expectations for students as they prepare for the transition to adult life. In general, most students have high expectations for their employment after high school. To build on these expectations, schools need strategies to bring student and parent expectations more in line and to ensure that students are encouraged and supported in their career goals. Parents of young adults with disabilities and school staff working with these students might consider the following recommendations to meet students' expectations and improve employment outcomes:

Strengthen parent and student expectations early.

Parents and students have high expectations for work after high school. Providing early and frequent opportunities for career exploration and planning will make it more likely that these expectations will be fulfilled.

- Introduce the concept of transition from school to work for all students as early as possible, because it is likely that students who are working while in school will have an easier time finding a job after high school.
- School staff should keep in mind the particular interests expressed by students with respect to the importance of work. Knowing that students rank earning a living and meeting new people as the most important aspects of work might help in designing various school-based efforts to promote career exploration and work experience.
- Develop and implement career-related curricula and materials which contain language and activities that reflect students' values related to work.
- Include competitive employment as part of students' Individual Educational Plans (IEP).
- Develop career portfolios for each student which contain information about the student's activities involving employment, such as work experience, internships, or job training.
- Work with local school-to-work partnerships as a way to link students with opportunities in local businesses. School-to-work activities provide a rich resource for career exploration and employment experience. Special education personnel should help to create and maintain a strong presence in school-to-work partnerships through membership on steering committees and the participation of special education students in all partnership activities.
- Give students and parents examples of students working in the community. Teachers should communicate success stories through meetings or newsletters, and have successful student workers return to talk to students and parents. These role models encourage students to work towards their goals.
- Learn about the impact of work on the students' Social Security benefits and how Work Incentives may help students save money for employment goals.

Connect students and parents as planning partners

Students and parents have differing views regarding expectations for work and beliefs in the student's level of self-determination. These differences in perception suggest that communication is an important area to focus on, particularly at the onset of the transition process. Parents and students who understand each other's ideas will be better able to work together to reach employment goals.

- At home, begin discussing career-related issues with students at an early age.
- Teachers should assign both classroom and take-home exercises related to career choices in order to promote discussion among their peers and with family members.
- Support students in actively participating with teachers and parents in the discussions related to their IEP by reviewing meeting agendas in advance and assisting them in developing questions and responses.
- Share career portfolios and work experiences routinely at parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings.
- Engage in family activities which promote ongoing conversations about career exploration and expectations for future work.
- Encourage family members to allow students to accompany them to their job sites and then discuss the experience.

Resources

The **Work Incentives Transition Network** is a collaborative effort of four projects funded by the Office of Special Education Programs to examine strategies for increasing the use of SSI work incentives by transition age young adults. Further information about this network and related projects may be found at:

<www.vcu.edu/rrtcweb/witn/ssi.htm>

The **Massachusetts Partnership for Transition (MPT)** is a statewide coordinating council which brings together projects, resources, and activities aimed at supporting the transition of all youth. This organization moderates a Web-based message board to assist schools and families in learning about and working with issues related to transition. This message board may be accessed at:

<www.childrenshospital.org/ici/icinet/forum>

A more detailed introduction of transition issues and resources may be found in ***Moving On: Planning for the Future***, the ICI's transition guide for parents, students, and educators. This publication can be accessed online at:

<www.childrenshospital.org/ici//publications/fulltext/mti_guide/index.html>

For more information about this study, contact:

Sheila Fesko
Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP
Children's Hospital
300 Longwood Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
(617) 355-6271 (v), (617) 355-6956 (TTY)
fesko@a1.tch.harvard.edu

For a publications brochure or general information about ICI , please call (617) 355-6506, ici@a1.tch.harvard.edu

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Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP
Children's Hospital
300 Longwood Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115

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